

THE YUKON TRAIL

An Alaskan Love Story

By WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

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ELLIOT FINDS HIMSELF IN A SERIOUS PREDICAMENT AS RESULT OF A REMARKABLE CHAIN OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

Synopsis.—As a representative of the government Gordon Elliot is on his way to Alaska to investigate coal claims. On the boat he meets and becomes interested in a fellow passenger whom he learns is Sheba O'Neill, also "going in." Colby Macdonald, active head of the land-grabbing syndicate under investigation, comes aboard. Elliot and Macdonald become in a measure friendly. Landing at Kusik, Elliot finds that old friends of his, Mr. and Mrs. Paget, are the people whom Sheba has come to visit. Mrs. Paget is Sheba's cousin. At dinner Elliot reveals to Macdonald the object of his coming to Alaska. The two men, naturally antagonistic, now also become rivals for the hand of Sheba. Macdonald, foreseeing failure of his financial plans if Elliot learns the facts, sends Selfridge, his right-hand man, to Kamatlah to arrange matters so that Elliot will be deceived as to the true situation. Elliot also leaves for Kamatlah and, wandering from the trail, believes that he faces death. Selfridge, on his arrival at Kamatlah, has his agents abduct Gideon Holt, old-time miner, who knows too much about Macdonald's activities. Elliot wanders into the camp where Holt is held a prisoner. The two men, overpowering the kidnappers, return to Kamatlah, where Elliot learns the truth about the coal land deals. On the way back to Kusik, Elliot meets a squaw, Metetsee, with her child who, Elliot learns, is Macdonald's son. Soon after his return, Elliot learns that Macdonald and Sheba have become engaged. Genevieve Mallory, a dashing widow, who is determined to win Macdonald, causes Metetsee, with her child, to visit Sheba and tell her story. She dismisses Macdonald, who blames Elliot for Metetsee's visit. Macdonald sends word to Elliot that he will kill him if he does not leave town.

CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

His companion flashed a look of warning at him and explained that they were going down the river to look for work outside of the district.

Suddenly Trelawney broke loose and began to curse Macdonald with a bitterness that surprised the government agent. What struck him most, though, was the obvious anxiety of Northrup to quiet his partner and to gloss over what he had said.

Elliot bought an automatic revolver next morning and a box of cartridges. He was not looking for trouble, but he intended to be prepared for it when trouble came looking for him. In the afternoon he walked out of town and practiced shooting at tin cans for half an hour. On his way back he met Peter Paget.

The engineer came straight to the subject in his mind.

"Selfridge came to see me last night. He told me about the trouble between you and Macdonald, Gordon. You must leave town till he cools down. Macdonald is a bad man with a gat."

"Is he? There'll be no trouble of my making. But if he starts any I'll be there. Macdonald doesn't own the earth, you know. I've been sent up here by Uncle Sam on business, and you can bet your last dollar I'll stay on the job till I'm through."

"Of course you've got to finish your job. But it doesn't all have to be done right here. Just for a week or two—"

"Tell your friend something else while you're on the subject. If I drop him, I go out free because he is interfering with me on duty. I'll put Selfridge on the stand to prove it. But



"Macdonald is a Bad Man With a Gat."

If he should kill me, his last chance for getting the Macdonald claims patented would be gone. The public would raise such a howl that the administration would have to throw your friend and the Guttschields overboard to save itself. I know that—and Macdonald knows it. So he stands to lose either way."

Paget knew this was true. But he could not drop the subject without one more appeal.

"He's not sore at you about the claims. You know that. It's because you brought the squaw up the river to see Sheba."

"I didn't bring her—hadn't a thing to do with that. I don't know who brought her, though I could give a good guess."

A gleam of hope showed in the eye of the engineer. "You didn't bring her? Diane said you threatened—"

"Maybe I did say I would. Anyhow, I thought better of it. But I'm glad someone had the sense to tell Miss O'Neill the truth."

"Who do you think brought her?"

"I'm not thinking on that subject out loud."

"But if you could show Mac—"

"That's up to you. I'll not lift a finger. I didn't start this war and I'm not making any peace overtures."

"You're as obstinate as the devil," smiled Peter, but in his heart he admired the downright of his friend.

The engineer went to Macdonald and gave a deleted version of his talk with Elliot. The Scotsman listened, a bitter, incredulous smile on his face.

"Says he didn't bring her, does he? Tell him from me that he lies. Your wife let out to me by accident that he threatened to bring her. Metetsee and he came up on the boat together. He was with her at your house when she told her story. He's trying to save his hide. No chance."

"Elliot isn't a liar. When he says he didn't bring the woman, that satisfies me. I know he didn't do it," insisted Paget stiffly.

"Different here. Who else had any interest in bringing her except him? Nobody. Use your brains, Peter. He takes the first boat down the river. He comes back on the next one. She comes back, too. They couldn't figure I'd be at your house when they showed up there to tell the story. That's where Mr. Elliot slipped up."

Peter was of different stuff from Selfridge. He had something to say. So he said it.

"Times have changed, Mac. You can't shoot down this fellow without making all kinds of trouble. First thing, we'd lose our claims. The administration would drop you like a hot potato if you did a thing like that. Sheba would never speak to you again. Your friends would know in their hearts it was murder. You can't do it."

Macdonald's jaw clamped. "Then let him get out. That's my last word to him."

CHAPTER XIV.

Ambushed.

Colby Macdonald, in miner's boots and corduroy working suit, stood beside his horse with one arm thrown carelessly across its rump. He was about to start for Seven Mile Creek camp with \$2,700 in the saddlebags to pay the men there.

Diane was talking with him. "She's young and fine and spirited. Of course it was a great shock to her. She had been idealizing you. But I think she is beginning to understand things better. At any rate, she does not hate you any more. Give the girl time."

"You think she will—be reasonable?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure of one thing. She'll not be reasonable, as you call it, unless you are reasonable."

"You mean—Elliot?"

"Yes. She likes him very much. Do you know that when the Indian woman came he urged Sheba not to listen to her story?"

"Sounds likely—after he had spent his good money bringing her here," sneered the mine owner.

"He didn't. Gordon is a splendid fellow. He wouldn't lie," answered Diane hotly. "And one thing is sure—if you lay a finger on him for this, it will be fatal with Sheba. She will be through with you."

Macdonald had thought of this before. It had been coming to him from several different angles that he could not afford to gratify his desire to wipe this meddlesome young official from his path. He made a slow, sulky promise.

"All right. I'll let him alone. Peter can tell him."

Swinging to the saddle, he spurred

his horse and cantered away. His mind was full of the problem that had come into his life. He rode abstractedly, so that he was at the lower ford of the creek almost before he knew it. A bilberry thicket straggled down to the opposite bank of the stream on both sides of the road.

The horse splashed through the ford and took the little rise beyond with a rush. Just before reaching the brow of the hill, the animal stumbled and fell. As its rider went headlong, he caught a glimpse of a cord drawn taut across the path.

Macdonald, shaken by the fall, began slowly to rise. From the shadows of the bilberry bushes two stooping fig-



He Was Fighting Desperately.

ures rushed at him. He threw up an arm to ward off the club aimed at his head, but succeeded only in breaking the force of the blow. As he staggered back stunned, a bullet glanced along his forehead and lodged a furrow through the thick hair. A second stroke of the club jarred him to the heels.

Though his mind was not clear, his body answered automatically the instinct that told him to close with his assailants. He lurched forward and gripped one, wrestling with him for the revolver. Vaguely he knew by the sharp, jagged shouts of pain that the second man was beating his head with a club. The warm blood dripped through his hair and blinded his eyes. Dazed and shaken, he yet managed to get the revolver from the man who had it. But it was his last effort. He was too far gone to use it. A blow on the forehead brought him unconscious to the ground bleeding from a dozen wounds.

On his way back to Seven Mile Creek camp Gordon Elliot rode down to the ford. In the dusk he was almost upon them before the robbers heard him. For a moment the two men stood gazing at him and he at the tragedy before him. One of the men moved toward his horse.

"Stop there!" ordered Gordon sharply, and reached for his revolver.

The man—it was the miner Northrup—jumped for Elliot and the field agent fired. Another moment and he was being dragged from the saddle. What happened next was never clear to him. He knew that both of the bandits closed in on him and that he was fighting desperately against odds.

The revolver had been knocked from his hand and he fought with bare fists just as they did.

They quartered over the ground, for Gordon would not let either of them get behind him. They were larger than he, heavy, muscle-bound giants of great strength, but he was far more active on his feet. He jabbed and sidestepped and retreated. More than once their heavy blows crashed on his face. His eyes dared not wander from them for an instant, but he was working toward a definite plan. As he moved his feet were searching for the automatic he had dropped.

One of his feet, dragging over the ground, came into contact with the steel. With a swift side kick Gordon flung the weapon a dozen feet to the left. Presently, watching his chance, he made a dive for it.

Trelawney, followed by Northrup, turned and ran. One of them caught Macdonald's horse by the bridle. He swung to the saddle and the other man clambered on behind. There was a clatter of hoofs and they were gone.

Elliot stooped over the battered body that lay huddled at the edge of the water. So badly had the face been beaten and hampered that it was not until he had washed the blood from the wounds that Gordon recognized Macdonald.

Opening the coat of the insensible man, Gordon put his hand against the heart. He could not be sure whether he felt it beating or whether the throbbing came from the pulses in his finger tips. As well as he could he bound up the wounds with handkerchiefs and

stanching the bleeding. With ice-cold water from the stream he drenched the bruised face. A faint sigh quivered through the slack, inert body.

Gordon hoisted Macdonald across the saddle and led the horse through the ford. He walked beside the animal to town, and never had two miles seemed to him so far. With one hand he staid the helpless body that lay like a sack of flour balanced in the trough of the saddle.

Kusik at last lay below him, and when he descended the hill to the suburbs almost the first house was the one where the Pagets lived.

Elliot threw the body across his shoulder and walked up the walk to the porch. He kicked upon the door with his foot. Sheba answered the knock, and at sight of what he carried the color faded from her face.

"Macdonald has been hurt—badly," he explained quickly.

"This way," the girl cried, and led him to her own room.

"Get Diane—and a doctor," ordered Gordon after he had laid the unconscious man on the white sheet.

While he and Diane undressed the mine owner Sheba got a doctor on the telephone. The wounded man opened his eyes after a long time, but there was in them the glaze of delirium. He recognized none of them. All night he raved, and his delirious talk went back to the wild scenes of his earlier life. Sometimes he swore savagely; again he made quiet, deadly threats; but always his talk was crisp and clean and vigorous. Nothing foul or slimy came to the surface in those hours of unconscious babbling.

The doctor would make no promises. "He's a mighty sick man. The cuts are deep, and the hammering must have jarred his brain terribly. If it was anybody but Macdonald, I wouldn't give him a chance," he told Diane when he left in the morning to get breakfast. "But Macdonald has tremendous vitality. Of course if he lives it will be because Mr. Elliot brought him in so soon."

Gordon walked with the doctor as far as the hotel. A brown, thin, leathery man undraped himself from a chair in the lobby when Elliot opened the door. He was officially known as the chief of police of Kusik. Incidentally he constituted the whole police force. Generally he was referred to as Gopher Jones on account of his habit of spasmodic prospecting.

"I got to put you under arrest, Mr. Elliot," he explained.

"What for?" demanded Gordon, surprised.

"Doc thinks it will run to murder. I reckon."

The field agent was startled. "You mean—Macdonald?"

The brown man chewed his quid steadily. "You done guessed it."

"That's absurd, you know. What evidence have you got?"

"First off, you'd had trouble with him. It was common talk that when you and Mac met, guns were going to pop. You bought an automatic revolver two days ago. You was seen practicing with it."

"He had threatened me."

"You want to be careful what you say, Mr. Elliot. It will be used against you." Gopher shot a squirt of tobacco unerringly at the open door of the stove. "You was seen talking with Trelawney and Northrup. Money passed from you to them."

"I gave them a loan of ten dollars each because they were broke. Is that criminal?" demanded Gordon angrily.

"That's your story. You'll get a chance to tell it to the jury. I shouldn't wonder. Maybe they'll believe it. You never can tell."

"Believe it! Why, you muttonhead. I found him where he was bleeding to death and brought him in."

"That's what I heard say. Kinder queer, ain't it, you happened to be the man that found him?"

"Nothing queer about it. I was riding in from Seven Mile Creek camp," Gordon was exasperated, but not at all alarmed.

"So you was. While you was out at the camp you asked one of the boys how big the pay roll would be."

"Does that prove I was planning a hold-up? Isn't that the last thing I would have asked if I had intended robbery?"

"Don't ask me. I ain't no psychologist. All I know is you took an interest in the bank roll on the way."

"I'm here for the government investigating Macdonald. I was getting information—earning my pay. Can you understand that?"

Gopher chewed his cud impassively. "Sure I can, and I been earning mine. By the way, how come you to be bent up so bad, Mr. Elliot?"

"I had a fight with the robbers."

"Sure it wasn't with the robbed? That split lip of yours looks to me plumb like Mac's John Hancock."

Elliot flushed angrily. "Of course if you intend to believe me guilty—"

"Now, there ain't no manner o' use in gettin' het up, young fellow. Maybe you did it; maybe you didn't. Anyhow, you'll gimme that gat you been totin these last few days."

Gordon's hand moved toward his hip. Then he remembered.

"I haven't it. I left it!"

"You left it at the ford—with one shell empty. That's where you left it," interrupted the officer.

"Yes. I fired at Northrup as he rushed me."

"Um-hu," assented Jones, impudent unbelief in his eyes. "At Northrup or at Macdonald?"

"What do you think I did with the money, then? Did I eat it?"

"Not so you could notice it. Since you put it in me flat-foot, you gave it to your pardner. You didn't want it. They did. They have got the horse too—and they're hitting the high spots to make their getaway."

Elliot was locked up in the dimly

lit jail without breakfast. He was furious, but as he paced up and down the narrow beat beside the bed his anger gave way to anxiety. Surely the Pagets could not believe he had done such a thing. And Sheba—would she accept as true this weight of circumstantial evidence that was piling up against him?

It could all be explained so easily. And yet—the facts fitted like links of a chain to condemn him. He went a chain to condemn him. He went a chain to condemn him. He went a chain to condemn him.

Kusik at last lay below him, and when he descended the hill to the suburbs almost the first house was the one where the Pagets lived.

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ane explained. "But he must have recognized the men. There are many footprints at the ford, showing how they moved over the ground as they fought. So he could not have been unconscious from the first blow."

"Unless they were masked he must have known them. It was light enough," agreed Elliot.

"Peter is still trying to get the officers to accept bail, but I don't think he will succeed. There is a good deal of feeling in town against you."

"Because I am supposed to be an enemy to an open Alaska, I judge."

"Mainly that. Wally Selfridge has been talking a good deal. He takes it for granted that you are guilty. We'll have to wait in patience till Mr. Macdonald speaks and clears you."

Gopher stuck his head in at the door. "You'll have to go, ladies. Time's up."

When Sheba bade the prisoner goodbye by it was with a phrase of the old Irish vernacular. "God save you kindly."

He knew the peasant's answer to the wish and gave it. "And you, too."

The girl left the prison with a mist in her eyes. Her cousin looked at her with a queer, ironic little smile of affection. To be in trouble was a sure passport to the sympathy of Sheba. Now both her lovers were in a sad way. Diane wondered which of them would gain most from this new twist of fate.

Selfridge had been shocked at the sight of Macdonald. The terrible beating and the loss of blood had sapped all the splendid, vital strength of the Scotsman. His battered head was swathed in bandages, but the white face was bruised and disfigured. The wounded man was weak as a kitten; only the steady eyes told that he was still strong and unconquered.

"I want to talk business for a minute, Miss Sedgwick. Will you please step out?" said Macdonald to his nurse.

She hesitated. "The doctor says—"

"Do as I say, please."

The nurse left them alone. Wally told the story of the evidence against Elliot in four sentences. His chief caught the point at once.

After Selfridge had gone, the wounded man lay silent thinking out his program. Not for a moment did he doubt that he was going to live, and his brain was already busy planning for the future. He knew now that in the violence of his anger against Elliot he had made a mistake. To have killed his rival would have been fatal to the Kamatlah coal claims, would have alienated his best friends, and would have prejudiced hopelessly his chances with Sheba. Fate had been kind to him. He had been in the wrong and it had put him in the right. By the same out of the cards young Elliot had been thrust down from an impregnable position to one